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TAGS: PHUM KJUS PREL PTER CO
SUBJECT: THINK TANK "NUEVO ARCO IRIS" BRIEFS AMBASSADOR ON
PARA-POLITICAL SCANDAL AND EMERGING CRIMINAL GROUPS

REF: 08 BOGOTA 4430

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Center-left think tank Corporacion Nuevo Arco Iris (CNAI--"New Rainbow Corporation") leaders Leon Valencia, Claudia Lopez, and Mauricio Romero told the Ambassador on February 2 that the GOC has not done enough to break paramilitary ties with politicians, especially at the local level. They agreed that the new criminal groups currently lack the military capacity and political agenda of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), but said the GOC needs to do more to combat this phenomenon. Valencia outlined CNAI's 12 years of experience in investigating victims' issues, promoting citizen security, proposing democratic reforms, and exploring ways to achieve peace. Valencia said Arco Iris wants to have a constructive relationship with the GOC, but finds it difficult due to GOC harassment of the group. End summary.

BEST KNOWN FOR PARA-POLITICAL WORK

¶2. (SBU) During a February 2 call on the Ambassador, CNAI leader Leon Valencia explained that CNAI is best known for its work outlining the links between former paramilitary groups and politicians. Claudia Lopez asserted that while the parapolitical scandal has faded from the headlines, CNAI research shows that one-third of the congressional members elected in 2006 had paramilitary ties. Lopez outlined her current research on parapolitical links at the local level, arguing that CNAI's findings show continuing efforts by regional elites--in conjunction with narco- and paramilitary-linked interests--to capture local government. Lopez said such corruption of local government poses as serious a threat to Colombian democracy as does the FARC, arguing that it is even more insidious because of its covert nature. Mauricio Romero described a separate CNAI project, which analyzes demobilized paramilitaries' testimony to identify the paramilitary groups' financial reach.

WORRYING CLAIMS ON EMERGING CRIMINAL GROUPS

¶3. (SBU) Valencia highlighted CNAI's recent report on emerging criminal groups (ECGs) (see reftel) which reported that membership in the groups had reached 10,000. (Note: The OAS Mission for Support of the Peace Process in Colombia most recently estimated approximately 3,000. End note.)

Valencia added that some local officials and public forces tolerate and/or are sometimes bribed by ECGs. Lopez said the ECGs do not currently have the command structure, military capacity, political agenda or legitimacy of the AUC, but argued that the rapid growth of these groups requires a more vigorous GOC response. If the GOC allows the new groups to continue to expand, it will soon face a threat similar to that of the AUC.

CNAI RECEIVES CRITICISM FROM ALL SIDES

¶4. (SBU) Valencia said the CNAI receives criticism--and sometimes threats--from all sides. Romero told the Ambassador that the Government of Sweden invited the group to Stockholm to give a presentation on the parapolitical scandal. However, he asserted that the Colombian MFA had lodged a formal complaint to prevent it. He alleged that the GOC has also encouraged donors not to support the group. Valencia added that CNAI researchers have been repeatedly criticized by top Uribe adviser Jose Obdulio Gaviria in personal, not substantive, terms. He said CNAI wants to maintain a critical but constructive relationship with the GOC, complaining that such GOC actions make that difficult. Valencia noted that the FARC has also frequently lashed out at CNAI's work.

SEEKING US ASSISTANCE

¶5. (SBU) Valencia sought USG help advancing CNAI's aims in three ways. First, they asked that the USG continue to speak out on the importance of civil society in promoting debate

and diverse views in a democratic society. Second, they voiced interest in obtaining funding for specific CNAI projects. Lastly, they urged the USG to continue projects to promote institutional reform in the executive and legislative branches, which they claim are the most susceptible to corruption.

¶6. (SBU) The Ambassador replied that challenging government conclusions was an essential role for civil society. He would continue to publicly stress the importance of civil society's work in a democratic society--even when the USG does not share the group's opinions. The Ambassador said the USG would consider CNAI requests for funding for specific projects, and offered to help put CNAI in contact with other think tanks and foundations. The USG would also continue to work to strengthen Colombia's democratic institutions. Valencia thanked the Ambassador for his support.

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